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# The Role of Public Relations in Higher Education Institutions in Ghana: The Case of University of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Campus through the University Relations Office

### Abstract

*The public relations sector of the University of Education, Winneba has embarked on a number of public relations roles to raise the profile of the University and also forestall any possible negative publicity. The paper outlined and discussed the role of public relations in higher education institutions in Ghana in general and the Kumasi campus of the University of Education, Winneba (College of Technology Education, Kumasi) in particular. For the purpose of this paper, the discussion focused on the following areas of PR; media relations, publications/publicity, reputations building, community relations, employee relations, expert communication (internal and external communications), event management, protocol and passages as practiced in College of Technology Education, Kumasi. Notwithstanding the achievements chalked in the areas of media relations, event management, protocol and community relations the PR office is not without a number of challenges..*

### Introduction

Public Relations (PR) results from a convicted and thoughtful communication process that recognizes that favourable public opinion, attention and support are not achieved by accident. It recognizes a great deal of hard work since success depends on ensuring that nothing happens by chance. This is probably due to the inevitable growing complexity of the world and its communication channels, particularly in the Ghanaian society. According to the British Institute of Public Relations (IPR), PR is a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. In 1999 the Institute added another version to the definition on reputation – Public Relations is about reputation, the results of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations practice is a discipline which looks after reputation – the aim of earning understanding, support and influence of public opinion.

Edward Bernays, “the grandfather of PR” in the United States of America (USA) sees the Public Relations practitioner as an applied sociologist who advises clients or employers on social attitudes and actions to be taken to win the support of the public upon which the viability of the employers and clients depend (Harrison, 2000). The first World Assembly Public Relations Associations held in Mexico City in August 1978 defined public relations as the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organisational leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which serve both the organization and the public interest” (World Assembly of PR, 1978). According to Institute of Public Relations, Ghana (IPR), public relations practice is planned and sustained management art and social science function based on an understanding of critical relevance, analyses trends and predicts their consequences. It establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization or group and its public based on truth, full information and responsible performance. (Institute of Public Relations, Ghana, 2010)

Philip Kitchen (1977) in his book *Public Relations, Principles and Practice*, came out with a revelation that over 500 Public Relations definitions exist; however a number of common themes abound as follows:

- Public Relations is essentially a communication function but the emphasis is on the two-way nature of the communication process;
- Public Relations is concerned with establishing and maintaining mutual understanding (goodwill) between an organization and its particular group of people (public); and that,
- Public Relations serves as an intelligent function, analyzing and interpreting trends and issues in the environment that may have potential consequences for an organization and its stakeholders.

Running through these definitions is the fact that the practice is essentially in promoting mutual understanding, rapport and goodwill between an organization and its publics. Such a condition, needless to say is indispensable to the success of every establishment including higher education. It must, therefore, be noted that this condition is premised on a two-way communication system with both inward and outward activities.

Today, good PR is vital to the successful functioning of any educational institution. Higher education has been branded as “too expensive” and suffers from the receiving charge that money is wasted and graduates cannot get jobs. Universities face competition for students and dwindling resources. It usually has three charges to fulfill; these are teaching, service and research. Many are aware of the first two, which are teaching and service. The job of PR is to create the awareness on the Research works in general.

### **Public Relations in Ghana**

The emergence of Public Relations in Ghana according to Gyan (1991) was characterized by scenario in which Public Relations Officers in such departments as administration, marketing, sales and personnel carried out Public Relations functions. Gyan (1991) further noted that, personnel from Information Services Department (ISD) of the Ministry of Communication were recruited and this had the effects of reducing the PR practice to publicity or press relations, thus limiting the scope of the practice in Ghana.

In a recent study conducted by Wu, Ming-Yi, Baah-Boakye, Kwame, (2008) on “Profile of Public Relations Practice in Ghana, Practitioners Role: Most Important Skills for Practitioners, Relationship to Marketing and Gender Equality” revealed that now most public relations practitioners perform managerial roles and take part in the decision-making process. However, public relations practitioners who perform communication- technician role do not have decision-making powers in their respective organizations. This result is different from the results of the Gyan (1991) study. The results of her study suggested that PR practitioners’ positions were very low on the organizational chart. However, they are now performing managerial roles and have moved up in professional status of PR in Ghana.

Currently, all state institutions have employed the services of qualified PR practitioners and consultants to help promote and protect their respective images. Thus, the practitioner is therefore a policy person and advisor to his or her organization.

### **Higher Education Administration**

Higher education has developed in numerous ways since the end of World War II. From Colonial Harvard University to today's online courses, higher education, whether public or private, has occupied an important place in the social, cultural and political spectrums. There are six (6) public universities in Ghana and a number of private ones.

The demand place on institutions of higher education to accommodate large numbers of students and to serve expanding functions has resulted in reforms in higher education in many countries including Ghana. The educational reforms carried out by government of Ghana in the 1990s resulted in the establishment of University of Education, Winneba in 1992.

Today, the long insulated position of higher education, like other professions such as law and medicine, is undergoing public scrutiny in all parts of its complex operations. Such change from enjoying reverend, unquestioned status to being pushed into high profile arena populated by the media, special interest groups, empowered consumers and other vocal entities, present new challenges to higher education public relations practitioners. (For example, in the College of Technology Education, Kumasi, students' reporters/Journalists pursuing part time programmes often scan notice boards for news worthy items for publication.) The recent proliferation of the press and the electronic media (Radio Stations broadcasting in local Ghanaian languages) may pose a serious challenge to the universities in Ghana on the best practices in media relations.

Meanwhile, as universities have expanded and become more expensive, there has been immense pressure by those providing funds (mainly government) to expect accountability from universities. Universities in the Third World countries including Ghana have experienced dramatic budget cuts and find it difficult to operate.

### **Background to the Study Area (University Of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Campus)**

The College of Technology Education, Kumasi was established in 1996. It is one the constituent colleges of the University of Education, Winneba. It started as Kumasi Technical Training Centre by the Government of Ghana with technical advice from the British government. In 1966, the name was changed to Technical Teachers College (TTC) and later upgraded to Kumasi Advanced Technical Teachers College (ATTC). It became part of the University of Education, Winneba in 1996 following the educational reforms carried out by the Ministry of Education in 1992 under PNDC Law 332 which brought together diploma awarding institutions constituent colleges together to form the University College of Education of Winneba.

The mission of the College is to train competent professional teachers for all levels of education as well as conduct research, disseminate knowledge and contribute to educational policy development. Currently, the College is the only institution mandated to train technical teachers for the technical schools and the polytechnics.

The College has three faculties, Faculty of Business Education (FBE) and Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education (FTVE) and Faculty of Educational and Communication Sciences (FECS) with six departments. The College offers both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It has students' population of over 6000 as at June 2010. The College operates four modes of education, full time/regular, part time, sandwich and distance learning. The College is one of the newly established in Kumasi, the second biggest city in Ghana. The PR office has a peculiar task of promoting the mission and activities of the College and to market it to the outside world.

### **The Public Relations Roles**

#### **Background**

The University Relations Office in the Kumasi Campus of UEW was set up in 1996 when the then Kumasi Advanced Technical Teachers College (KATTC) was integrated into the University system.

The main objectives of the office was to provide an efficient, effective and high quality corporate publicity and public relations services to the University of Education, Winneba (Kumasi Campus) including:

- Production of external and internal corporate communication and publicity materials;
- Proactive and responsive media relations activities;
- Advising on laid-down guidelines to other departments on media, liaison and promotional activities;
- Staging of special events and provision of protocol services to University of Education, Winneba and its guests;
- Enhancing the image and visibility of the university through the various functions of media relations, publications, advertising, marketing, special events and strategic public relations planning, for the administrative and academic departments in achieving the university goals.

The practice of PR in an educational setting like the universities is similar to that of other government institutions. It is very important that PR specialists be part of the institution's management team. Many a time institutions do not include PR in their management team. Ideally the PR should attend top-level management meetings involving the Vice Chancellor and other Administrators to ensure what we call "Learning the Whys and the Wherefores of decision made and lending counsel". The public relations practitioner may operate at the level of manager (sit at management table e.g. Deputy Registrar at KNUST) or Technician (implementing).

University and College PR are generally carried out through the public information bureaus. The responsibilities consist of producing and distributing of news releases, photographs and special events. The major roles of public relations are basically to analyze, create, project, influence, sustain, educate and build relationships.

There are many different functions or activities engaged by the public relations practitioner to be able to perform all these roles – whether in organizational functions such as media relations, and publicity or societal functions such as social responsibility and community relations, the functions are the driving forces behind the way public relations is practiced in institutions.

For the purpose of this paper, the discussion will focus on the following areas of PR as practiced in University of Education, Winneba, Kumasi Campus .

- Media Relations
- Publicity/ Publications
- Community Relations and Protocol
- Employee Relations
- Expert Communication and Reputation Building
- Event Management

### **Media Relations**

Media relations is one of the key functions of public relations. It is an important aspect of public relations since the media are important tools for effective public relations. Again, the media, being the channel through which information is disseminated to the organization's public, are themselves a major public of the organization.

Media relations is an organisations function that is conducted through the media through channels such as, television, newspapers, magazines, and radio. It involves working with the various media for the purpose of informing the public of an organization's mission, policies, and practices in positive and consistent manner. The goal is to maximize positive coverage in the mass media without paying

### *Twum-Ampomah*

for it directly as adverts. An effective media relation often depends on designing and implementing a well thought-out plan.

The responsibilities of the PR specialist as in the UEW, include writing and distributing news releases, feature articles and rejoinders to the press and compiling press list, publishing of newsletters, handling and maintaining media information, service, arranging press, radio and television interview for management. Also preparing marketing plans and strategic promotional and marketing efforts are other activities undertaken by the PR.

A classic example of good media relations practice was documented in 1999 when Barclays Bank was donating some items to UEW-K and KNUST. The media team decided to have the presentation done on the Kumasi campus of the UEW to give the campus more publicity due to the good relationship that the PR office had established with them. The type of media to use depends on accessibility and affordability in addition to the target audience. At times, the University has little or no control over the messages in the media; it is the reporter and writers that decide what will be published, depending on the angle they choose.

### **Publicity/Publication**

Publicity is a public relations function to ensure that the University has a strong public image. It can help the public to understand the University and its products and services. From promotional activities to marketing campaigns, publicity is the tool that public relations uses to get the word about the University to the public. Negative publicity can cost organizations millions of Ghana cedis and force them out of the market.

The public relations section has embarked on a deliberate campaign to prevent negative publicity through coordinated activities with the students and the media in Kumasi. The creation of the notice board to display pictures of events and programmes are a means of disseminating information to the University community through “News in Pictures”.

Production and distribution of newsletters, leaflets, brochures and magazines are some of the activities undertaken to publicize the University. Articles are sometimes written and sent to the media to publish, thereby keeping the University in the public mind through constant positive publicity.

### **Community Relations and Protocol**

The relationship that an organisation has with its community can be vital to the success of that organisation. Institutions can interact with the community in numerous ways, from participating in community activities to putting on events through donations. Successful organizations understand that their relations with the surrounding community are important.

Community goodwill must be maintained through proactive public relations programmes in cities and towns where universities are located. For this reason, it makes sense for universities to participate in neighborhood programmes. The PR department should also serve as liaison between the university and the community and work closely with other social partners in the locality.

For instance, University of Education, Winneba –Kumasi Campus has constantly maintained healthy relationships with the Manhyia Palace and other sub-chiefdoms in the catchment areas, like Atwima Agogo, Asuoeyeboah, Tanaso and Apatrapa. The naming of one of the two halls of residence, Atwima after the traditional area is a vivid example.

Occasionally, students and other members of the community are allowed to make use of the university’s facilities to promote good neighbourliness. They are also invited to attend the university’s functions- e.g. graduation (congregation), Deans Day celebration, public lectures, matriculation

ceremonies and inauguration of projects. The community would be prepared to defend the university in times of difficulty or whenever a problem arose.

The introduction of special admission requirements of for girls is a clear indication of the university's corporate social responsibility to the communities. The installation of the UEW-K wireless internet facility will benefit the community when fully operational. Additionally, the University Library is open to the members of the community to access it.

There is currently a proposal before management (by the University Relations Office) for the consideration of UEW's contribution to the National Best Teacher Awards scheme instituted by the Ghana Education Service (GES). In respect of building relationships, it may be noted that the College is one of the first institutions to pay a courtesy call on the Ashanti Regional Minister, Honourable Kofi Opoku-Manu when he assumed office recently.

### **Employee Relations**

"Internal motivation is a vital factor which helps building morale, enhancing productivity and creating team spirit with staff." (Ackerman, L.J. 2007, p.279)

Public relations provides an early warning system by avoiding interruptions which may occur when a single unexpected issue or unplanned social/political changes arise. Public relations practitioners interact more with the internal and external audiences than any one person in the organisation. Public relations helps institutions to manage change and ensure smooth transition in the system. For example, whenever there is a change in management, the public relations office informs the staff and students of the change and its implications. Through seminars and workshops, the staff and students are given in depth knowledge about the University, what it stands for, its structures and policies.

### **Expert Communication and Reputation Building**

The Public Relations Office deals with the management of both internal and external communication. It is responsible for the promotion of the mission and vision of the University and also manages and improves the flow of information within the University and between the University and the publics that it serves.

Public relations professionals have a role to play in helping management to keep in touch with their various publics because the role of public relations within an organization has become that of spokesperson to management. They actively solicit both employee and consumer opinions and make management aware of the effects of various decisions on clients and employees. That is in line with the two-way symmetric public relations model by Grunig and Hunt (1994).

It is important to realize that public relations is vital not only in helping to secure the universities funding, but also in the recruitment of both staff and students. We have to make sure that we build that basic awareness of what the University (UEW) is all about. We have to keep in mind that university is a learning community that needs different constituents to join in to make it strong.

For example, when the part-time programme started, the University Relations Office visited institutions and organizations to create the awareness of the introduction of the new programmes by distributing brochures and other leaflets to sensitize them. The challenge for the future will be to continue to become more effective in getting stories out to the media and the public without taking the lecturers' time and energy away from teaching or research.

The institution of Media Encounter and Meet the Press series are some of the programmes initiated to promote research findings and papers presented at conferences and in international journals. Example, the Department of Technology Education research into the use of oil palm for furniture was given much publicity. Recently, the office wrote a circular, calling on the University community to furnish

the University Relations Office with such information for further publication to the University community.

Public relations helps to overcome management's isolation, something that can affect every organization sooner or later. An inescapable PR role is opening the eyes and ears of management to what is really happening out there (intelligence gathering function). The 1999 students' demonstration on the Kumasi Campus, recent students' reaction to the University's delay in releasing results on time and the breakdown of the University of Education, Winneba Online Student Information System (UEWOSIS) are few instances where the office quickly gathered enough and relevant information and advised management on the steps to avert students' agitations and confrontations.

### **Event Management**

Event management is the process by which an event is planned, prepared, and produced. It encompasses the assessment, acquisition, allocation, definition, direction, control and analysis of time, finances, people, products, services and other resources to achieve objectives. Event management involves studying the intricacies of brand, identifying the target audience, devising the event concept, planning the logistics before actual execution of the modalities of the proposed event.

To be able to organize a very successful event, there is the need for proper planning and basic skills to ensure that nothing is left to chance. Verbal and written communication, interpersonal, organizational, time-management and project management and multi-tasking are the requisite skills required for successful event management. Producing a successful event is all about attention to details and meticulous planning. This is the reason why this writer could not agree more with Dave Lake when he said "Successful events do not just happen" Dave Lake, (2010)

Events can be one of the most effective means of engaging a target audience and can provide the ideal vehicle for supporting your institution, through delivering information about work carried out there and plans for the future. The series of Media Encounter programmes are part of the events designed to tell UEW story. Events send a clear message. It provides a useful means of conveying a message about an institution or an individual department. For example in the recent media encounter, two departments namely the department of Design and Technology Education and Gender Mainstream directorate were featured.

Events can also be labour-intensive and time consuming. If things go wrong, guests can be left with a lasting negative image about the institution. It is therefore imperative to look at objectives and if necessary, make the decision not to hold an event. There are key ingredients in event management and this could not be over emphasized. They are the objective(s) of the event, budget covering the event, the venue, the date and time, the key players (i.e. guest speakers, invited guests, target audience). The maiden Congregation for the Kumasi Campus of the UEW in 2010, Dean's Day, Autonomy Lecture, African University Day, Otumfuo's Annual Lecture and Media Encounter are but a few of the events staged on the campus. Matriculation and orientation of newly admitted students and SRC executives respectively are some of the events staged regularly on the campus.

### **Achievements**

The University Relations Office of the University has chalked a considerable success in the areas of media relations, communication, event management and protocol services.

The office, in collaboration with the students, staff and management has been able to establish and maintain a very good rapport with the media. This relationship has resulted in the projection of an enviable image of the University in media circles. There hasn't been any negative publicity so far in the media on the University. Thus, the University enjoys a good reputation.

The University is always in the news projecting its activities, core values and programmes. In the area of publication and publicity, staff has contributed a number of articles in the University Newsletter, it has produced also attractive brochures for our part-time and MSc in Marketing and e-Commerce programmes. The brochure covering the Kumasi Campus of the UEW and published in 2005 for the maiden congregation of the campus, is another classic example.

The office frequently issues News Releases to inform the University Community on the events and programmes taking place in the university and outside the university. The PR office has successfully organized and staged a number of high profile events, like congregation, matriculation, media encounter, congregation lectures, staff training, workshops, seminars, orientation programmes for students, etc. Good organisational skills of event management have contributed to the successful organisation of events, sometimes, at a very short notice. The concern for the image and reputation of the University motivated the staff in the PR office to make sure that all the activities are coordinated to ensure incident free events.

The PR section has exhibited excellent customer relationships among the numerous clients, guests or visitors that do business with the University (both local and foreign). Good protocol services have been provided for our numerous guests and warm front desk/reception has always been accorded our visitors. Commendations for good works both written and verbal have been received from the cherished guests; example was a letter from Mrs. Quashie-Sam, former Registrar of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST).

A successful campaign launched to make UEW-K a household name or to inform the Kumasi public of the new status of the Kumasi Campus of the University. There have been tremendous results. UEW-K is now known to most institutions and organizations as well as the general public, including taxi and “trotro” drivers.

In the areas of policy direction, a number of proposals have been written in the form of memoranda to ensure that the University moves in the right direction. The introduction of radio lecture and other innovative programmes on Mynd FM (official radio station for the College) have contributed to the projection of very enviable image of the institution.

### **Challenges**

In spite of the successes chalked, the section faces a number of challenges. One of the challenges is that the University Relations Officer is on 24 hour call which sometimes eats deep into the night. Every incident outside working ours is reported to him for redress.

The problem has compounded over the period partly because of the absence of the Principal and Registrar living on campus. The PR is the first point of call and in the event of any crisis he should be prepared to manage it. The public relations office of the College of Technology Education, Kumasi operates at the level of a section and does not enjoy the status of a department. This situation limits its scope and effectiveness.

The head of the PR office is not on most of the committees where decisions are taken. He is not a member of the College management team to able to get first hand information on all issues pertaining to the College in order to be able to explain to the public on demand. Limited office space is another serious challenge. There is no privacy to university guests who come to discuss confidential matters. Besides, the space allocation is too small to accommodate staff and equipments.

A means of transport is sometimes difficult to come by but, thanks to the Deputy Registrar who readily releases his pick-up to the section for the numerous assignments.



The absence of a qualified staff with journalism background to handle news and article production is another setback. The delay in the procurement of certain vital logistics and release of funds for programmes are a source of worry.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper has demonstrated that for universities in Ghana and for that matter College of Technology Education, Kumasi to be able to communicate their concrete deeds to the public, the role of public relations could not be over emphasized. Specifically, the main objectives, roles and achievements of the public relations office of the Kumasi Campus of the University have been highlighted. The challenges of the office have also been presented. To address some of the challenges, the following recommendation are being made.

First, it is hoped that the PR Office will be upgraded to that of a department to enable it operate fully and efficiently.

Second, Management should consider making the head of PR a member/ observer on the College management team at their meetings.

Third, Additional staff with the requisite qualification should be appointed to help the PR office function effectively to be able to cover all areas of modern public relations.

Last, the acquisition of a means of transport for the office would help the outfit function effectively. In addition, the provision of a new strategically located and spacious office will assist the unit execute its work in a more professional and diligent manner.

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